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**The American Mainline Protestant Church:
Being the Body of Christ in Context without
Christendom**

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**An Honors Thesis
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In today's society, religion has garnered a stigma that is hard to overcome. This stigma is not a new one. From the crusades to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, some of the most violent conflicts in our world's history have been started because of religion. This history of conflict, negative behavior, prejudice, and perceived strangeness has led to religion being cast into a negative light in the media and popular culture. Relatedly, the phrase "dying church" is one that is becoming all too familiar for Christian clergy across America. For the past ten years, across the United States, church has become a dying phenomenon. Negative views of the church from both inside and outside the church have led to a decline in attendance. This is shown in recent studies by groups such as the "Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life," who have found that one fifth of citizens of the United States and one third of those under 30 are unaffiliated with a religion. This is a five percent increase from just five years ago.¹ It is the fear of clergy and parishioners across the country that attendance will continue to decline until churches can no longer stay open. When all of the Christian churches in the country come to a close, the death of the church will have occurred.

Though these studies pinpoint some forms of mainline Protestant Christianity to be nearing death, prominent Lutheran Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber is indignant against this claim: "when the number crunchers and church consultants say the church is dying...may I suggest that we only say this when we forget what the definition of church is."² Bolz-Weber is not concerned with statistics of church attendance, and does not fear that Christianity is dying. Rather she is referencing diversions from the biblical definition of church; of what Jesus intended His church

¹ "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, Religious Affiliation: Diverse and Dynamic." *The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life* (2008): 1-143. *Pew Forum*. Pew Research Center. Web. 1 Aug. 2014. 5.

² Bolz Weber, Nadia. "Stop Saying the Church Is Dying (a Sermon for the Rocky Mountain Synod Assembly)." *Sarcastic Lutheran: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*. Patheos, 10 May 2014. Web. 25 Sept. 2014.

to be. When the definition of church becomes something other than what Jesus intended, it is sure to fail and this is where Bolz Weber is pinpointing the perceived death. Church has become something other than the biblical definition, but a church that is not aligned with what Jesus intended is sure to fail, and this is where the death is occurring. But there is not one biblical definition of church, and therefore not one way to *be* church. The bible offers many definitions and examples. Daniel Migliore, author of *Faith Seeking Understanding* describes these many examples of what the biblical definition of church can be. He writes:

In the New Testament the church (ecclesia, “assembly” or “congregation”) refers to the new community of believers gathered to praise and serve God in the power of the Holy Spirit in response to the gospel of the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.³

Migliore expands on this, explaining that church is a unique relationship with one another and with God. It is a community that bears witness to those beyond the church walls, but also serves others. “In the *ecclesia* power and responsibility are to be shared, and there is always to be a special concern for the poor, the weak, and the despised.”⁴ The church is often referred to as “The body of Christ.” In the body of Christ, all rely on Christ, the head, but are also interdependent with one another as other parts of the body. “Believers are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28) and the variety of gifts that have been given are for the enrichment and edification of the whole community.” The body of Christ is especially effective given the diversity of experience that can be found within a single community. One who is suffering can find solace in the suffering, wounded body of Christ on the cross. Alternately, one who is rejoicing can find a parallel in the rejoicing of the risen Christ. This is an image that is apt in healing, comfort and understanding, but can also challenge the believer. Furthering this, the church is described as

³ Migliore, Daniel L. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004. Print. 251.

⁴ Migliore, 252.

“the community of the spirit,” in which “racial, gender, and class divisions are broken down, strangers are welcomed.”⁵ This is a church that is expectant of the Kingdom of God to come. This is a church that offers the sacrament to all who enter their doors. This coincides with Bolz Weber’s understanding of church. She sees a group of people following Christ, welcoming all, and offering the sacraments, and she understands this group as a thriving church. But this is not what church has been in recent times. It has become a church other than what Jesus and his disciples intended.

In support of Bolz-Weber and with the biblical understanding of church clarified by Migliore, this paper also challenges the view that American Protestantism is dying. When focus is shifted from numbers and statistics to context and content, thriving churches that follow the biblical idea of being the body of Christ can be found everywhere. Though individual churches are facing closure, American Protestantism as a whole is not dying. Rather, in today’s society, churches that have followed the historical examples of great theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. have responded to a call to offer sacrament and serve the contextual needs around their churches as the bible calls them to do, and they have continued to thrive. Churches survive when they move away from institutionalized power, surface-level theology, cheap grace and polarized politics, and toward a focus on the needs of their context, working to meet those needs through service and worship.

Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, authors of *American Grace: How Religion Unites and Divides Us*, explain that the mainline Protestant Church has been the most influential church in the United States for a long time.⁶ The Protestant Church is the sect of Christianity that

⁵ Migliore, 254.

⁶ Putnam, Robert D, and David E. Campbell. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010. Print.

separated from the Roman Catholic Church during the Reformation. Mainline Protestants have been known for adopting higher criticism of biblical text and liberal theology. Protestants have a wide spectrum of beliefs, from fundamentalist conservatism to increasingly liberal pluralist theology. The word Protestant thus has a wide meaning. Putnam and Campbell separate the mainline church into the liberal denominations- Episcopalian, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian and etc. These are distinguished from Evangelical Protestants and “Black Protestants.”⁷ Since the 1950s these denominations have been the most dominant in America, and the most influential throughout the public square and politics. The term ‘mainline’ connotes that these are the denominations that have historically been the closest thing to establishment churches in America. Non-mainline Protestant churches would include Black and Evangelical Protestant churches, among others. The following will focus on these mainline American Protestant Churches. Though this paper understands the mainline Protestant Church in America to not be dying, the numbers provided by the Pew Research Group, Putnam and Campbell and more cannot be ignored. The idea that the church is dying is born out of these numbers, and so this idea and the numbers must be addressed in order to move past the diagnosis of death.

The Death of the Body of Christ?

Both the suggestion that the church is dying and the phenomenon of the deviation from the biblical definition of church are not new. Theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer have been commenting on these ideas for decades. It is important to understand the longevity of these issues through theologians such as Bonhoeffer so that we can better understand the state of the church and learn from past mistakes. In 1937, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote his book *The Cost of*

⁷ Putnam, Campbell, 12-15.

Discipleship. Bonhoeffer understood the church as being a group of true disciples doing the work of God and being the body of Christ in the world. In addition he wondered how a common man could answer to Jesus' call to discipleship in his [1937] world.⁸ He understood that being a disciple of Jesus outside was by no means easy. The call to be the body of Christ was a lifelong journey and sacrifice. What Bonhoeffer concluded is that authentic answers to Jesus' call were rarely found in members of churches in his time. Rather, churches of his day were churning out "spiritual corpses" that were a result of the preaching of "cheap grace." He describes cheap grace as "forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian 'conception' of God."⁹ In his context, this attitude towards church was incredibly dangerous. The church in Germany all but embraced Hitler's justification that the genocide of the Jews was a Christian cause. Churches and congregants were flippant about the actions of their leader and their country because their theology was kept at a surface level. The gravity of actions like Hitler's were never understood in a Christian context by these churches. When church is kept at this surface level, congregants keep their confessing at a surface level. Cheap grace doesn't allow one to fully process that being a disciple is costly and is life altering. Bonhoeffer says that "cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves."¹⁰ It is asking God solely for forgiveness for individual sins such as thinking badly about a neighbor or ignoring a homeless person, and being content in knowing that these sins are forgiven. While this repentance is important, Bonhoeffer explains that costly grace is asking God for forgiveness and working to counteract the structural patterns in place that drove the homeless man into poverty and led to your subtle, subconscious racism against your neighbor. "Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace*

⁸ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Cost of Discipleship*. New York: Touchstone, 1995. Print. 37-38.

⁹ Bonhoeffer, 43.

¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, 44.

because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ.”¹¹ If churches of Bonhoeffer’s time had fully understood the responsibility of their discipleship, they would have fought against Hitler and the Nazis alongside Bonhoeffer. But the churches in Bonhoeffer’s context did not understand the concept of costly discipleship. This kind of discipleship requires action, seeks grace but does not have to work for it, and goes beyond surface level Christianity. When Christians do not ask for forgiveness of deeper and structural sins, live by the Word of God outside of Sunday service, or strive to be good disciples, there is nothing that distinguishes them as a community of the body of Christ.

Though Bonhoeffer wrote these words in 1937, they still have important relevance today. Atrocities such as genocide and marginalization continue to occur today, and the temptation to ignore these atrocities is certainly present. Additionally, churches are still not practicing the idea of costly grace or responsible discipleship. Similarly, Kenda Creasy Dean, author of the book *Almost Christian*, has found that rather than practicing true Christianity today most “Christians” practice a form of “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.”¹² Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is “an adherence to a do-good, feel-good spirituality that has little to do with the Triune God of Christian Tradition and even less to do with loving Jesus Christ enough to follow him into the world.”¹³ Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is the evolution of cheap grace into today’s society. It is a practice that has not taught the importance of Jesus, the church, and its mission. Churches that teach this have not given their youth any significant reason to stick around as they grow older. Rather, the church has attempted to make a fun place for kids, so events are held for youth that

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, 45.

¹² Dean, Kenda C. *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Print. 7.

¹³ Creasy Dean, 4.

make it feel as though church is a fun, party-like atmosphere. The thought process behind this is that a fun atmosphere will make kids want to come back to church. But where the effort is put in to create the party, the effort to instill a deep, timeless faith falls to the wayside. Creasy Dean explains that “American young people are, theoretically, fine with religious faith--but it does not concern them very much, and it is not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school.”¹⁴ They are not concerned because church is just a fun place that makes them feel good, nothing has sunk in for kids about how important faith should be. Creasy Dean describes adolescents today as thinking of church as just “fine.”¹⁴ Nothing makes them stay. Thus, when youth stop attending church, attendance and adherence statistics begin to plummet.

The trend of decline due to the fact that youth are just “fine” with religion is different than the “God is Dead” decline movement of the 1960s. In the 1960s, the evolution of sexual norms and political views divided Americans. Putnam and Campbell described this time as a “widespread, rapid, multifaceted change.”¹⁵ This change permeated the religious sphere as well, leading to a rapid decline in church attendance, especially among college-aged young adults. Mike Regele and Mark Schulz, authors of *Death of the Church* explain that these changes “reflected a massive gap in the value systems between the young boomers and their elders.”¹⁶ Putnam and Campbell explain that as a response to the liberalist movement in the 1960s there was a movement in two divergent political directions throughout the 1970s and 80s. In response to this, in the 1990s and 2000s we have seen another decrease in religiosity in America. Today’s decline also occurs predominantly among youth, which can be at least partially attributed to the combination of globalization and technological advances. While adolescents are more interested

¹⁴ Creasy Dean, 3.

¹⁵ Putnam, Campbell, 94.

¹⁶ Regele, Mike, and Mark Schulz. *Death of the Church*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1995. Print. 33.

in their technology and their connections across the world, the people trying to draw them back into church are not up to date on these advances. Creasy Dean expands on current research regarding youth and globalization and technology:

Media scholar Henry Jenkins calls the early twenty-first century's global vernacular *participatory culture*, to which forms the dominant vision of reality presented to young people through channels like open-source technology, Wikipedia, reality television, Youtube, and so on. These technologies, states the 2006 MacArthur Foundation Report on Digital Learning and Media, have reframed young Americans' expectations for social relationships, educational, and cultural understandings, and have even altered their neurological functioning.¹⁷

Young people now have a different understanding of what it means to be a community and how to interact within a community. Technology is now used not only to interact within a community but sometimes it even upholds the community itself. This is where we see the aforementioned divide between generations. Given the technological divide and the trend that youth are seeing church as "just fine" there truly is nothing pulling kids in to church. Though churches attempt to attract youth with fun events, the generational gap often affects youth connection to churches as well. The combination of these is detrimental.

Furthermore, youth often have ideological differences with churches as well. In the 1990s and 2000s, "young Americans came to view religion, according to one survey, as judgemental, homophobic, hypocritical, and too political."¹⁸ Youth today are statistically more open minded than ever. If a church does not match this open-mindedness, the youth will not want to participate in that church. Here is yet another reason provided as to why younger people stop going to church. Because of this, there has been a marked a rise in individuals who identify as "nones." Nones are people who, "when asked to identify with a religion, they indicate that they

¹⁷ Creasy Dean, 124-25.

¹⁸ Putnam, Campbell, 121.

are ‘nothing in particular’ but often “express some belief in God and even in the afterlife.”¹⁹ The number of people who have “never attended church” has also seen a rise, and more and more young people are becoming less attached to organized religion since 1990. The Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life’s findings in their 2012 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey also correspond with that of Putnam and Campbell. The Pew Forum has found that “more than one-quarter of American adults (28%) have left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion - or no religion at all.”²⁰ Furthermore, the Pew Forum has found that American Protestantism is quickly falling away from the majority. The number of those who identify as Protestant now stands at 51% of America’s population; only a slight majority which is poised to continue declining - according to both the Pew Forum and Putnam and Campbell. The culmination of ideological differences, generational gaps, and teaching in worship and Sunday school that doesn’t leave one invested has led to this incredible decline.

In all of this, we can see where the idea is born that the church is dying. In today’s capitalist, consumeristic, speedy society; church has not found a place in the hearts of the youth. Regele and Schulz coincide with this idea when they describe the early 21st century as going through rapid and extreme social and economic growth. This is subsequently affecting the church. Regele and Schulz are blunt about these effects; “there are literally thousands of churches across America that are old and dying. In many churches, the average age of its members is between sixty-five and seventy.”²¹ Regele and Schulz add more reasons, besides effects on youth, for this decline. One example of this is that arguments within the church on the basic elements of the Christian message have made it less influential. Different sects of

¹⁹ Putnam, Campbell, 16, 126.

²⁰ Pew Forum, 5.

²¹ Regele, Schulz, 52.

Protestantism declare different truths about the Bible and interpret scripture differently. This can be seen in discussion of LGBT Christians and their acceptance in some churches and not in others. Regele and Schulz describe the effect these types of arguments have on the church: “So while theologians battled one another, local congregations stagnated.”²² Another argument is that culture has rejected the church as “a grand storyteller.” The church no longer narrates the history of America. Their “traditional cultural role [has] diminished.”²² In all, Regele and Schulz emphasize that across all denominations, churches are failing to reach younger generations, baby boomers in attendance are declining, and almost all churches are “slanted towards the elderly population.”²³ They conclude that things are looking increasingly grim for the American Protestant church. These issues were the same when Bonhoeffer addressed them in the 1930s, and they coincide with issues with youth as well.

These issues, however, are not found with the biblical model of the church as the body of Christ. What these authors--along with Putnam and Campbell and the Pew Research Group--are addressing is the deterioration of the *institutionalized church*. This is a church with hierarchical structure that exerts influence on society, politics, and government around it. Regele and Schulz call this decline “the movement of the mainline Protestant denominations to the margins.”²⁴ Putnam and Campbell describe the Protestant church as mutable and fluid--it is the perfect illustration of constant change. This constant change is much more than other major religions. “The aforementioned fluidity has meant schisms, mergers, the founding of new faiths, and the arrival of faiths from other nations.”²⁵ But for some reason what was previously seen as a vehicle

²² Regele, Schulz, 85.

²³ Regel, Schulz, 107.

²⁴ Regele, Schulz, 182.

²⁵ Putnam, Campbell, 11.

for change and fluidity has recently become stagnant. Generational gaps, lack of technological advances, and dated social and political stances have turned away both youth and adults. Now the change has shifted from within the church to outside the church; as people begin to identify as nones or as not religious. Because of this, and America's subsequent shift away from the Protestant church, the church is losing its influence. When Regele and Schulz described the church as currently "slanted towards the elderly," this is because when the elderly were young, the church was booming, prosperous, and influential. Now with the decline in youth today it is no longer the powerful church of the past, and this is where we are feeling the death.

The powerful influence that mainline Protestants once exerted in the public was a result of Christendom. Now the Christendom is waning. In a critique of the modern church, Daniel L. Migliore in *Faith Seeking Understanding* describes the Protestant church as an institution that has "allied" itself with state power in the past. He goes as far as to liken this power to an imperial state, in which the church and its members had special privileges and recognition.²⁶ People outside the church were the minority and were not represented in their government. Craig A. Carter, author of *Rethinking Christ and Culture* describes Christendom as the concept of western civilization having a "religious and secular arm that are both united in the adherence to Christian faith."²⁷ Historically we have seen Christendom asserted in violent manners. Philip Jenkins, author of *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* describes Christianity as "an ideological arm for Western Imperialism."²⁸ Christian scriptures have been combined with political ideologies and used from the Crusades to Manifest Destiny to justify violence,

²⁶ Migliore, Daniel L. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004. Print. 255.

²⁷ Carter, Craig A. *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2006. Print.

²⁸ Jenkins, Philip. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. , 2011. Print. 1.

displacement and murder. For Carter, Christendom has too often equated violence. By resorting to violence, Christians are denying their Christ. “The problem with Christendom,” he says “is that it requires the church to merge with the church’s host culture to the point of denying the lordship of Jesus Christ.”²⁹ Migliore expands on this point, explaining that Christendom turns away from the “central call of the Gospel.”³⁰

This Christendom has had influence on the church since the times of Emperor Constantine, who converted to Christianity in order to gain the support of members of the new and growing religion.³¹ Constantine gave the church great power that has extended for over a millenium. This Christendom has been a major influence in America, especially in politics and governmental institutions. Since the 1950s American currency has read “In God We Trust” and our Pledge of Allegiance has marked “One nation under God.” These references to the Christian God are examples of what Putnam and Campbell label “government-sanctioned expression of religion.”³² In the peak of Protestantism in America, around the 1950s, few questioned these additions to government-sanctioned policy. The vast majority of Americans attended a Christian church at this time and American patriotism seemed to go hand-in-hand with Christianity. That being said, since the 1990s this has no longer been the consensus. Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt criticizes Christendom in saying that “when we ‘enculturate Christianity and even bring it to power...it is no longer what Jesus had in mind.”³³ Christendom has often gone against what the Gospels teach and against what America was meant to stand for. Bolz-Weber explains that “But

²⁹ Carter, 15.

³⁰ Migliore, 171.

³¹ Jenkins, 25.

³² Putnam, Campbell, 1.

³³ Blumhardt, Christoph Friedrich. qtd. in Wogaman, J P. *Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. Print. 206.

the thing is, buildings, numbers, money, power – and other aspects of worldly success may indeed be signs of A kingdom, but brothers and sisters, they are not necessarily signs of THE Kingdom.”³⁴ The vision of the body of Christ from the New Testament is not intended to be violent or even powerful. It is intended to be an alternative community follows Jesus’ example, that provides sacrament, serves the community, and welcomes all. As we have seen, Christendom in America does not follow this model.

But American Christendom seems to be crumbling. America is continuing to evolve culturally at a rapid rate and in this, globalization plays a huge factor. At the same time the church is going through many changes. Regele and Schulz explain that the current change that America is going through is too rapid and widespread for churches to keep up. Putnam and Campbell argue similarly; “while change and adaptability have long been the hallmark of American religion, over the last half century, the direction and pace of change have shifted and accelerated.”³⁵ With this chaotic pace of change in America (and across the world) the church no longer has favored status as once before. Statistics from Putnam and Campbell and the Pew Research Group are showing that the American family no longer revolves around its church attendance. As we have seen, youth are no longer invested in church life. Brandon Robertson’s “To the Dying Church from the Millennial” puts it this way: “God has seen fit to pull out the foundation of Christendom and cause the whole thing to crumble.” He does not see this as the death of the church, but rather a “re-revealing to us the radical message of our Lord.”³⁶ The mainline Protestant church is about to be “on the outside looking in.” Put more bluntly, “the

³⁴ Bolz Weber, Nadia. "Stop Saying the Church Is Dying (a Sermon for the Rocky Mountain Synod Assembly)." *Sarcastic Lutheran: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*. Patheos, 10 May 2014. Web. 25 Sept. 2014.

³⁵ Regele, Schulz, 80.

³⁶ Robertson, Brandon. "To the Dying Church From a Millennial." *Sojourners*. Sojourners, 8 May 2014. Web. 15 Oct. 2014.

institutional church as we have known it is dying.”³⁷ Incredible change of this manner is never easy to go through, and has had many negative effects on churches as they feel the church as they know it dying. This is of growing concern for Christians and clergy throughout the country, as their foundations are shook and they have to reevaluate what it means to be a mainline Protestant in America. Churches are responding in different ways to this perceived death and necessary self-reflection.

Bodily Responses to the Crumbling Christendom

It must be acknowledged, firstly, that the crumbling of Christendom is not felt in every church in America. Numbers are clearly not on the decline for every church in America. “Clearly,” Regele and Schulz say, “there are pockets of growth around the country and some mighty large churches.”³⁷ The megachurch is a phenomenon that attracts thousands of Americans into giant, stadium-like churches every Sunday morning. Putnam and Campbell describe megachurches as “city-sized” and “consumer-driven.”³⁸ Many of these churches employ flat screen TVs, contemporary rock bands, and ipads for their services. They have coffee and gift shops in their foyers. These churches continue to be successful and many of their congregants feel that their services and programs are “life-changing.” But their consumeristic contemporary preaching may hint more to Bonhoeffer’s idea of cheap grace than anything. Putnam and Campbell explain of one of these churches that “the religion taught at this megachurch is more about lifestyle than laws or liturgy.”³⁹ This type of preaching is easy and welcoming, and it isn’t any wonder that it has attracted so many people. It has “found a way to be all things to all

³⁷ Regele, Schulz, 143.

³⁸ Putnam, Campbell, 54,60.

³⁹ Putnam, Campbell, 61.

people.”⁴⁰ This type of church is effortless for a congregant because one does not need to be altered by the message when it meets people where they are at. Furthermore, their sense of community is created solely within the church. Book clubs, exercise groups, and other small groups provide friendships and support within the church. There is no reason for these people to create community outside of the church, where the crumbling of Christendom is actually felt. The church reaps the benefits of the members’ time, money, and community and becomes self-sustaining. This attracts multitudes of people thus the megachurch has created its own establishment and does not feel the effects of the crumbling Christendom.⁴¹ Because of this, for the purposes of this paper, megachurches are the exception to the diagnosis of the declining church. Their model of growth is worth further analysis but will not be addressed in depth in this paper, as these churches have departed from the typical model of American Mainline Churches. This paper will focus on traditional mainline Protestant churches in America; churches that once held power in the United States and are now feeling the absence of this power.

One of the issues already discussed in this paper has been that church no longer is able to connect with youth in today’s society. Katie Stever’s paper “A Quest for a New Christianity: Churches Respond to the Decline” outlines several different, new types of churches that have risen out of today’s shifting mainline church in response to this. Stever outlines several alternative approaches to church, and even coins some new terms for these churches. Alternative churches sometimes provide a more suitable environment for church in today’s society, especially for those who have been marginalized or oppressed by the church in the past. These churches are reexamining what it means to be the body of Christ in an America without

⁴⁰ Putnam, Campbell, 69.

⁴¹ Von der Ruhr, Marc, and Joseph P. Daniels. "Subsidizing Religious Participation through Groups: A Model of the "Megachurch" Strategy for Growth." *Review of Religious Research* 53.4 (2012): 471-91.

Christendom. Stever sees these churches as a response to an unevolving church pitted against an evolving culture. Younger generations in society feel “discomfort” towards mainline churches. This discomfort stems from polarized political and social views of churches, outdated worship styles, and more.⁴² This coincides greatly with how Creasy Dean has described youth in the church as well. Ideological differences have created a marginalized feeling among many within the church. Through vignettes and other research, Stever has put a voice to these discomforts and has addressed some important issues in today’s society regarding religion, especially when it comes to younger generations. Traditional practices of mainline churches simply aren’t working anymore. This goes further than what Creasy Dean has outlined, as are leaving congregants disenfranchised, uncomfortable, and victimized.

As a result of this, we find alternative churches rising out of the dust of crumbling Christendom in America. Stever outlines four different models of alternative churches. The first is “the new conventional.” In this model, churches maintain the standard day and time for worship, but do so in a different space. This can be due to aesthetic or financial reasons. This model takes away the church building, which can often be an intimidating factor for new church-goers. The second model is “the small church.” These are small congregations, often held in houses at non-traditional worship times. They provide a more personal feel of worship that meets congregants where they’re at. The third model is “the church of the profane.” Stever describes these churches as meeting in “the margins.” These churches seek out their people; often in the streets or unconventional places such as pubs. The last model is the “hybrid.” A hybrid church is commonly known as a megachurch. These churches include the use of

⁴² Stever, Katie. "A Quest for a New Christianity: Churches Respond to the Decline." (2014). Print.

technology, contemporary music, and stadium like seating for very large congregations. The hybrid church can often appeal to today's consumerist, individualist society because it allows congregants anonymity among the large crowd and plays genres of music that are found commonly today. It is important to recognize that even alternative churches have many different approaches to what it means to be the body of Christ in the community.

Each of these models is a response to the shift in today's culture that is slowly but surely changing the mainline Protestant church. As people leave churches for a variety of reasons, alternative churches are finding ways to give the message of God to these people outside of the traditional church setting. As Stever has demonstrated, there needs to be multiple models of church to cater to different needs of Christians (and even potential Christians). There are plenty of people who are staying within the traditional model of church because that model works for them. There isn't one model that fits all people. Alternative church models are a response to the crumbling Christendom that bring the Body of Christ to where the congregants are at and gently nudge them towards where they need to go to grow in their faith and relationship with God.

A non-response to the "issue" of the dying church comes from Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber. Bolz-Weber's thoughts allow us to recognize already-thriving churches within our own communities. As we know, Bolz-Weber thinks that the worrisome hand-wringing over this decline in numbers is misguided and unproductive. In a sermon delivered to the Rocky Mountain Synod Assembly, she argues that the Lutheran Church needs to stop worrying about the "death" of their church and of Christianity. Rather Bolz-Weber vehemently exclaims against the consumeristic idealization of a "successful" church. She observes American Christians' growing concern over their lack of attendance, influence, and influx of money. Bolz-Weber encourages

Christians to turn away from numbers and profits as a way to measure the success of the church, and explains that “if in your congregation, regardless of size, prestige or property, if the word is preached and the Eucharist shared and water poured and forgiveness of sins received, then congratulations, your congregation is a success.”⁴³

Bolz-Weber makes some great points about the true meaning of Christianity and what Jesus had envisioned the church as body of Christ to be. But are the above-quoted worship elements really all that it takes for a church to be “successful”? Is this what Jesus had envisioned for a successful church? What about community outreach and caring for the poor? In her sermon, Bolz-Weber talks about Jesus kissing lepers, befriending prostitutes and hanging out with tax collectors. Christians are supposed to emulate this behavior by caring for the poor, the sick, and the outcast. Does this happen if churches are simply fulfilling Bolz-Weber’s worship-oriented definition of success above?

Though her sermon may not reflect it, Bolz-Weber’s congregation certainly goes beyond the bare-bones idea of church being eucharist, baptism, and forgiveness of sins. Her church describes themselves as “...a group of folks figuring out how to be a liturgical, Christo-centric, social justice-oriented, queer-inclusive, incarnational, contemplative, irreverent, ancient/future church with a progressive but deeply rooted theological imagination.”⁴⁴ This is most certainly not a church that solely focuses on the eucharist, word, and baptism. While liturgical worship is clearly important to them, they are also doing work in the community and emulating Jesus and the disciples. With this in mind we can come to understand Bolz-Weber’s vehemence against the hand-wringing over the death of the church. She know that the church is not dying because it is

⁴³ Bolz-Weber, 3.

⁴⁴ "Who We Are." *House for All Sinners and Saints*. House for All Sinners and Saints. Web. 8 Jan. 2015.

thriving before her eyes. House for All Sinners and Saints is just one example of a Protestant church in America that has responded to the needs of its community, served there, and grown exponentially over the years. They have taken the idea of “success” in a church from numbers to context.

Mariah Furness-Tollgaard is the current Pastor at Hamline United Methodist Church (HUMC) in St. Paul Minnesota. Before being appointed to HUMC in 2014, Furness-Tollgaard was pastor at a Methodist Church in El Cerrito, California that, in rebuilding as a congregation after selling their building, described its successes as having worship, spiritual formation, and mission. Furness-Tollgaard described this church as being very motivated towards mission and kept these missionional ideals in mind when setting goals for the growth as a church. When the church reached its goals of having meaningful worship, spiritual formation, and mission, they considered themselves successful.⁴⁵ Both Furness-Tollgaard and Bolz-Weber bring in the ideas of service and sacrifice to one’s neighbors. In “Letters to a Dying Church,” Robertson explains that Christianity is not supposed to be about wealth but rather love and sacrifice. This is a stark difference from the consumer-based, cheap grace churches that have been described above. Robertson understands that going back to the idea of churches focusing on love and sacrifice will not only mean making the church look “significantly different than it has in the past”⁴⁶ but also significantly different from churches influenced by capitalism and consumerism today.

From Stever’s alternative churches, Bolz-Weber’s and Furness-Tollgaard’s churches we can come to better understand that the mainline American Protestant Church is not dying. Rather, we have to come to terms with the death of the church *as we know it* and how this affects the

⁴⁵ Furness-Tollgaard, Mariah. "Interview with Methodist Pastor Mariah Furness-Tollgaard." Personal interview. 18 Aug. 14.

⁴⁶ Robertson, 2.

mission of the church. It is not simply enough to go through the standard motions of a Protestant service in a new kind of space that is not dominated by today's consumerist culture. Rather, Protestant churches have to learn how to reach out into the community, make a difference, *kiss the leper*, and feed the poor in new ways in today's society. It is not enough to say that the church is being transformed by God and its okay that it will no longer be "traditional," "powerful," and "wealthy." The church must let this part of itself die and discern how to continue to Jesus' work in the streets without the resources that they have employed for so many years before now. The church must interact with culture without the means of Christendom.

The Body of Christ and Culture without Christendom

The church has always been intertwined with culture, and most commonly it has asserted its influence simultaneously with Christendom. Theologians such as Philip Wogaman and H. Richard Niebuhr help us to understand how church interaction with culture has occurred in the past. Wogaman, towards the end of his book *Christian Ethics*, addresses the church in the final years of the twentieth century. Part of Wogaman's discussion of the Twentieth Century and the church includes the development of the Social Gospel Movement. This is a movement of mainly Protestant churches that developed as a response to social problems that arose following the civil war. As problems changed during the World Wars and the Industrial Revolution, so did the the response from churches. The Social Gospel Movement had "three overlapping but distinctive strategies" as a response to these social issues.⁴⁷ A conservative strategy created housing and programs to directly assist the impoverished and new immigrants. A radical strategy advocated for "sweeping social change" that often supported socialism. The third strategy, a reformist one,

⁴⁷ Wogaman, J P. *Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. Print. 195.

urged for social change such as calling for unionization among businesses but also worked directly with those in poverty. The Social Gospel was the church's way of finding its helpful place within the context of the world.

Similar to this idea is H. Richard Niebuhr's book, *Christ and Culture*. It has had a long history of influence on Christian scholarship and continues to be applicable even today. When one discusses the church and culture, the discussion cannot be had without mentioning Niebuhr and his typologies. In the book, Niebuhr explains that Christianity has an "enduring problem." This problem is that "the Christ of the New Testament is so fixated on the absolute sovereignty of God that his teaching is so radical that it cannot be lived out in this world."⁴⁸ For Christians, this becomes a fundamental issue because being human means living in this world. Christians wonder how they can follow these teachings of Christ and still function in their world. The world's social problems have definitely not decreased in the decades following the industrial revolution and improvement in technology only seems to be contributing. With increasing injustice throughout the world, the Church must discern its place among society. How much cultural and social engagement is proper for a church to have? How do they fit into the context of their world, nation, and community? Out of these questions, Niebuhr's Christ and Culture problem is born.

But before he can begin to solve this problem, Niebuhr first has to further unpack what "Christ and Culture" means. He begins by defining who Christ is. He admits that there are many different interpretations as to who Christ was, outside of the uncontested facts among Christians such as that Jesus was born of Mary through immaculate conception, that he was crucified under

⁴⁸ Carter, 35.

Pontius Pilate, and was resurrected. In regards to the nature of Jesus and his relation to culture, Niebuhr sees mostly the virtue of love in Jesus and his unity with God which gives him superior moral value. In describing the inherent nature of Christ, Niebuhr explains that:

He is the moral son of God in his love, hope, faith, obedience and humility in the presence of God, therefore his is the moral mediator of the Father's will toward men. Because he loves the Father with the perfection of human *eros*, therefore he loves men with the perfection of divine *agape* since God is *agape*. Because he is obedient to the Father's will, therefore he exercises authority over men, commanding obedience not to his own will but to God.⁴⁹

According to Niebuhr, then, Jesus is the in-between for God and humans and perfectly reflects that. Christians are, therefore, to believe in Jesus, and to be loyal and obedient to Him. It is important to understand these concepts if the church is to emulate Jesus and be the body of Christ in the world.

Because the church is essentially intertwined with culture, culture must also be defined. After defining who Christ is, Niebuhr discusses what culture means on different spectrums of Christianity; some say it is Godless in a negative sense and others argue that the worldly values of culture are what provide organization and the ability to function together in groups. Niebuhr, however, steps back into a wider definition of culture. He concludes that "what we have in view when we deal with Christ and culture is that total process of human activity and the total result of such activity...now the name civilization is applied in common speech."⁵⁰ He then continues on to further define culture as social, human achievement, a way to provide ourselves with values and these values are for the good of man, and as temporal and materialistic. With the definitions of both Christ and Culture in mind, Niebuhr explains;

⁴⁹ Niebuhr, H Richard. *Christ and Culture*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001. Print.

⁵⁰ Niebuhr, 32.

The relation of these two authorities constitutes its problem. When Christianity deals with the question of reason and revelation, what is ultimately in question is the relation of the revelation in Christ to the reason which prevails in culture.⁵¹

Christians have been working to reconcile this issue since day one. Niebuhr provides five typologies of how Christians have been answering this “enduring problem.” These typologies will be prove important for understanding what it will look like to be a thriving church in today’s society.

Firstly, Niebuhr describes the typology “Christ against Culture.” Those who follow this typology attempt to “reduplicate” Christ in his rejection of the institutions of society.⁵² Though Niebuhr acknowledges that this is a consistent, constant, and understandable approach, he critiques the typology in saying that it denigrates reason, does not acknowledge the effect of sin, is legalistic, and deemphasizes the Father and Holy Spirit aspects of the Holy Trinity. Secondly Niebuhr describes “Christ of Culture.” This approach is a full implementation of cultural ideals into the Church and the attempts to effect a universal meaning on the gospel, and is most connectected with the liberal Protestantism of Niebuhr’s day. While Niebuhr seems to identify with this typology well, he does critique that it borders on having loyalty to culture as an idol over Christ and gives too much polarity between law and grace. Thirdly Niebuhr introduces “Christ above Culture” where the idea of “the Church of the Center” is born. This is “an attempt to hold together belief in both Christ and the world.”⁵³ This approach is rationalized by the parable in which Jesus tells the Pharisee to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to

⁵¹ Niebuhr, 11.

⁵² Carter, 42.

⁵³ Carter, 46.

God what belongs to God.”⁵⁴ Those of this typology see this verse as instructing followers of God to be obedient to both sources of authority, though there is a gap between the two.

Fourthly Niebuhr describes the typology of “Christ and Culture in Paradox” in which there is a dualism of the human heart. Those who follow this approach believe that there is a conflict in the human heart between the desire for personal righteousness and God’s righteousness. Niebuhr sees this as a motif for Paul and Luther in their writings. Luther distinguished between two kingdoms in our lives, one of God and one of the world. He understood that Christians needed to try to be just and follow the laws of both God and the world. Where Christians fail in this, they have the grace of God through Jesus. Niebuhr sees this as problematic because it lead to abuses of worldly power and cultural conservatism in situations such as Germany in World War II and it also lead to antinomianism. Antinomianism, Niebuhr explains, is defined believing that because people are saved by grace, moral or immoral actions make no difference since fate is already predestined.⁵⁵

Lastly Niebuhr introduces “Christ transforming Culture.” This is a conversionist approach in which a high view of creation and the created goodness of humanity leads people to believe that they can be a vehicle of God’s mission to transform all things by lifting them up Himself.⁵⁶ Niebuhr sees this as optimistic that culture can be transformed for the Glory of God. Niebuhr explains this approach with words of John the Baptist and St. Augustine. These two believed in the spiritual transformation in man’s life and the fundamental goodness of man. Niebuhr hardly critiques this approach, which would lead one to believe that it resonates for him. In all, even though he never critiques the “Christ transforming Culture” typology, Niebuhr says

⁵⁴ Matthew 22:21, Mark 12:17

⁵⁵ Niebuhr, 52.

⁵⁶ Carter, 50.

he cannot tell us which of these typologies is the right answer. He explains that each believer must make the decision for his or herself in faith. However, he says that this should not be done individually, but rather with a “social existentialist” view. This decision must be made in the presence of “Christ and His cloud of witnesses.”⁵⁷ Churches have always had the freedom to interpret how they are to be within their community, but as we have seen this has often included an unfortunate use of Christendom.

Furthermore Protestant churches in today’s society are difficult to place into these five typologies. Niebuhr’s typologies have long been influential in helping our understanding of how churches should relate to culture, but with the widespread, rapid social change of the 21st century, Niebuhr’s typologies may need some alteration. For example, in her sermon, Nadia Bolz-Weber does not necessarily fit neatly into one of these categories. She definitely seems to renounce today’s culture, which seems to go along with “Christ Against Culture.” This is found in her insistence that the gospel sets Christianity apart from culture and that preaching this gospel is the church’s “*main job*.”⁵⁸ Bolz-Weber also emulates the idea of “Christ and Culture in Paradox.” Niebuhr explains that the paradox form distinguishes the gospel from culture and calls Christians to create space for the gospel. It seems as though this is how Bolz-Weber envisions the church. Furness-Tollgaard explains that “a church definitely has to be relevant and speak to people’s lives and speak to what they’re wrestling with”⁵⁹. While this could lean towards “Christ of Culture,” Niebuhr’s explanation of this category seems reductionistic - “little more than an expression of the highest values generally shared in a world that is capable of goodness and

⁵⁷ Carter, 52.

⁵⁸ Bolz-Weber, 4.

⁵⁹ Furness-Tollgaard, Mariah. "Interview with Methodist Pastor Mariah Furness-Tollgaard." Personal interview. 18 Aug. 14.

reason in its common life.”⁶⁰ This would mean that the church is not set apart from the rest of society in its activism in the community. Because of these examples, perhaps it is more helpful to use a combination or alternation of Niebuhr’s typologies. Rather, it seems like Furness-Tollgaard and her churches seem to search for a combination and/or balance between “Christ and Culture in Paradox” and “Christ the Transformer of Culture.” This is because these churches strive to create a place for the gospel in society but also attempt to make the world a better place, or transform it. Niebuhr admits that he does not know if there is a “correct” way to relate Christ and culture in one’s life. He calls it an existential decision. “They are decisions that cannot be reached by speculative inquiry, but must be made in freedom by a responsible subject acting in the present moment on the basis of what is true for him.”⁶¹ It makes sense, then, that Furness-Tollgaard’s church would choose a combination of typologies from Niebuhr. Churches have been evolving since Niebuhr wrote *Christ and Culture* in 1951. Furness-Tollgaard’s church, and others like it, are discovering what it means to be the Body of Christ in their own community in the 21st century, which Niebuhr did not have the chance to observe. These churches are engaging the gospel inside of their communities, evolving with changes in culture, but all the while remaining diligent in upholding Christian values and morals. But at the same time, each church will have a distinct way of engaging and will have their own niche. These churches are shifting from responding to culture as a whole to responding to the context that they find themselves in.

With the decline in numbers in American Protestant Churches, engaging the gospel inside of today’s societal context might occur without a building, or without an endowment, but

⁶⁰ Wogaman, 228.

⁶¹ Niebuhr, 241.

certainly without the establishment that had assisted in the church's outreach for so long. We have seen that this is indeed possible, as has been demonstrated by Furness-Tollgaard's church in El Cerrito, CA. That being said, even that church ended up moving into a church building with another congregation. It is not enough to say that the church is being transformed by God and it's okay that it will no longer be "traditional," "powerful," and "wealthy." The church must let this part of itself die and discern how to continue to Jesus' work in the streets without the resources that they have employed for so many years before now. This means letting go of Christendom, and discerning their contextual place in society.

Now we must learn how to be churches without Christendom. Craig A. Carter, author of *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post Christendom Perspective* helps us to better understand what Niebuhr's typologies, and being church within culture, might look like without Christendom. Carter acknowledges Niebuhr's influence throughout the years. The book has been very helpful and a lot of Christian scholarship has drawn from it. That being said, Carter feels "Christ and Culture" is flawed due to Niebuhr's presupposition of Christendom, the "religious and secular arm that are both united in the adherence to Christian faith."⁶² For Carter, Christendom is equated to violence and by resorting to violence, Christians are denying their Christ. "The problem with Christendom," he says "is that it requires the church to merge with the church's host culture to the point of denying the lordship of Jesus Christ."⁶³ Because of this, Christians need to move beyond Christendom in tackling the Christ and Culture problem. This coincides with Furness-Tollgaard's church in El Cerrito, they found a way to be church without the traditional infrastructure of a church in power.

⁶² Carter, Craig A. *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2006. Print. 14.

⁶³ Carter, 15.

It is important to learn how to do what Furness-Tollgaard's church was able to do, but we do not need to necessarily abandon Niebuhr's typologies altogether. To move past Christendom, Carter reorganizes and adds to Niebuhr's five typologies and offers a refresh of the understanding of church and culture. Firstly, he distinguishes two types of typologies. The first are "Christendom Typologies" which are characterized by their acceptance of violent coercion. The second are 'Non-Christendom Typologies' that reject violent coercion.⁶⁴ The three Christendom Typologies are "Christ legitimizing Culture," "Christ humanizing Culture," and "Christ transforming Culture." In the legitimizing typology, Carter describes power-hungry types who use Jesus as a cultic symbol to gain control over what they want. He uses the crusades as an example of this in the world. In the humanizing typology, Christians accept Christendom and passively support it. Martin Luther is used as an example for this type of typology, due to his opinion of hierarchical structures and appeal to worldly authority. These Christians tend to believe the teaching of God is for all of society, even though they will resort to violence in their attempt to bring the kingdom. These examples are dated and problematic in their use of violence and coercion, and unfortunately can still be seen in action around the world today.

Examples of churches that are being the body of Christ within culture without coercion are helpful to better understand how to be church, and accurately emulate the body of Christ in the 21st century. Taking out Christendom, with the help of Carter, will allow churches to get closer to the true definition of being the body of Christ. The three Non-Christendom Typologies are "Christ transforming Culture," "Christ humanizing Culture," and "Christ separating from Culture."⁶⁵ The first believes that the gospel is for all of society, but unlike the Christendom

⁶⁴ Carter, 129.

⁶⁵ Carter, 143.

typology, does not attempt to impose this by force but rather through word and deed and preaching. Carter uses examples of non-violent transformers such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Desmond Tutu to legitimize this. The Christ humanizing culture in a non-Christendom world approach still seeks to humanize and recognize the nature of sin in humans like Luther. But rather than applying this idea to all of society, the non-Christendom side of this typology believes in a special and set-apart mission of the church and thus do not need to fall victim to the desire of using violent coercion. Lastly Carter introduces “Christ separating from Culture.” This is the belief that God’s message is only for the church and the church should be recluse from society. Carter uses the Amish as an example of this, as well as monks and nuns.⁶⁶ These examples of churches are less problematic than the Christendom typologies. The multitude of examples again highlights the idea that there is not one way to be the body of Christ in the society. For example, the Amish church is not a type of church in culture that has historically appealed to many people, but it is a non-violent response that does not succumb to Christendom.

Ideally, churches in America that are feeling the crumbling of Christendom will take the time to reevaluate what it means to be the body of Christ in their own context without institutionalized power. But this is not what always happens. Carter points out Christendom is mostly dead in Europe and Canada, and is sliding towards death in America. While Canada and Europe have accepted this death seemingly well, many churches in America seem to be taking a different approach. Carter notices and critiques the extreme political polarization of Christians in today’s society in America. Christians magnetize to either extreme conservatism or extreme liberalism, both of which Carter sees as an attempt to cling to the Christendom. Creasy Dean

⁶⁶ Carter, 143-144.

recognized this as an issue that today's youth take with today's churches. If Christians who are stuck on Christendom can find power in a polarized political view, they will continue to feel comfortable and not challenged in their faith. But Carter knows that Christians cannot cling to this power forever and remain viable. He in fact predicts the complete fall of the Protestant church if this political clinging continues to occur. Carter offers the suggestion for Christians to let go of all that they have learned from Constantine, and try to remember what they actually learned from Jesus:

Somebody else can run the government, fight the wars, and struggle for power, money and fame. Christians have better things to do. We need to imitate our Lord and strive to live lives of forgiveness, reconciliation, and service to the poor. We need to live together in community and put the needs of each other ahead of our own selfish desires.⁶⁷

Carter feels that in doing so, Christians will be more true to the word of God and the mission of the first Church. This idea certainly resonates with the idea of being the body of Christ in society, one that welcomes and serves all.

But Carter is taking the church way too far out of society. Church is inextricably linked to culture and Jesus was inherently political. Pulling out of the political process may not be possible, and as we will see later with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, sometimes its not even possible to stay completely nonviolent. In fact, Carter may fit well into Niebuhr's "Christ against culture" typology. His "non-Christendom" typologies work because they are working against institutionalization and structural violence. But at the same time, churches that are working in these categories that he is describing are doing more so at a *contextual* and *congregational* level. Furthermore, lack of participation in political and capital processes would not allow the church to fight for justice as it is called by Jesus to do. This is why it is hard for a single church to fit

⁶⁷ Carter, 202.

into either Niebuhr or Carter's typologies. Diana Butler Bass, author of *Christianity for the Rest of Us* explains that there isn't one way to "do" church. "It isn't mapquest" she says.⁶⁸ Rather each congregations is going to have its own way of adapting to it's surroundings and working for its people. She goes further:

Congregations are... fluid, often receptive to change, and potentially the most innovative. Beyond the congregation, however, mainline Protestant institutions are in a state of deep crisis and desperately in need of renewal...I am more convinced than ever that if American religious institutions are to regain their spiritual grounding they will need to listen and learn from the spiritual practices of local congregations.⁶⁹

Churches that are thriving, despite claims of the death of the church, are reconciling their enduring problem of Christ and Culture by being Christ to their contexts. Some are even doing so without the context of Christendom. As we can see, contextual work in communities that fights against structural violence and spreads the Word of God through spiritual worship leads to flourishing church communities. Churches are going into their communities because "they are forever being challenged to abandon all things for the sake of God: and forever being sent back to into the world to teach and practice all things that have been commanded them."⁷⁰ Being the body of Christ in the world means engaging in the world, and serving it as Jesus would.

Sustaining the Body of Christ

While it is important to learn how to be church without Christendom responding to contextual needs in the community, churches need to be careful to not lose the essentials of church as well. Daniel Migliore cautions about the "dangers of distortion in the servant model" of church.⁷¹ He explains that "when church understands itself only in terms of its practical

⁶⁸ Bass, Diana B. *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith*. New York: HarperOne, 2007. Print. 71.

⁶⁹ Bass, 9.

⁷⁰ Niebuhr, 29.

⁷¹ Migliore, 260.

service to the world, it subordinates proclamation of the gospel and nurture of the spiritual life to zeal for political action.”⁷² Church needs to be more than social activism. Moreover, “missing in the individualized, privatized, bureaucratic, and cosmetic forms of Christianity today is any real understanding of the interconnectedness of life that is expressed in all the basic doctrines and symbols of classical Christian faith.”⁷² Church is not sustainable in practicing “moralistic therapeutic deism” but is also not sustainable in acting solely as a vehicle for social change. This means that while mobilization and service work in Jesus’ name to make the world a better place are a vital part of “being church” in today’s world, church also needs to offer its nurturing sacraments; the acts such as prayer and worship that glorify God and fortify the believer. Piazza and Trimble, authors of *Liberating Hope*, explain that “effective, powerful, transformative worship can be the engine that drives all the other worthy values and ministries of the church.”⁷³ Church that transforms its congregation within worship should also be uplifting those congregants simultaneously.

What we alone can offer is an experience of the Divine. If people can encounter the God from whom they came and to whom they will return, they will be transformed and we will have fulfilled our principal calling. All our other mission and ministries radiate from the worship that is the heartbeat of the church.⁷⁴

Through this nourishment, the “heartbeat of the church,” the congregation as the “hands and feet” of Christ are able to continue to be mobilized.

A we can see, the bigger picture of the church needs to include effective and nourishing worship. In her book *Pastrix*, Nadia Bolz-Weber chronicles hosting a “Beer & Hymns” event just hours after the Aurora shooting in Colorado. Members and friends of the church had been in

⁷² Migliore, 261.

⁷³ Piazza, Michael, and Cameron Trimble. *Liberating Hope: Daring to Renew the Mainline Church*. Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2011. Print. 171.

⁷⁴ Piazza, Trimble, 172.

the theater at the time of the shooting, and though she contemplated canceling the event, it went on. She explains that they “occupied” Beer and Hymns that night. In a defiant act of solidarity and faith in the midst of tragedy they belted out songs such as “It is Well With my Soul.”⁷⁵ This is an example of the many roles worship can have. It can be a place of renewal, a place of mourning, and even a place of defiance.

Furthermore, the church is a means of bringing the gospel and God to those who need it. Bolz-Weber goes on to talk about a God who “shows up” in the toughest times.⁷⁶ Providing worship space both in regular times and in the midst of tragedy allows space for people to notice God’s “showing up.” Providing the Eucharist, the hymns, the prayers, scripture and more bring spiritual nourishment in times of great need. The liturgy of the mainline Protestant church is created in a way that properly supports, nourishes, and comforts those who are in times of great need. It offers God’s love and grace to the suffering for free.

Simultaneously, this worship liturgy mobilizes the comfortable within the congregation. It offers a challenge -a call to change- to those who are content in their lives and in their faith. Aspects of the service, such as the prayers of the people, open comfortable peoples’ eyes to the needs of the world and their communities and mobilizes them to do God’s work. The liturgy offers a complete package in being the body of Christ in the world. “By word, sacrament, prayer, and life together, the church participates, in a provisional and incomplete way in the triune love of God; by its manifold ministries of witness and compassion and its service of justice,

⁷⁵ Bolz-Weber, Nadia. *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*. New York: Jericho Books, 2013. Print. 197.

⁷⁶ Bolz-Weber, 200.

reconciliation, and peace in the world, the church participates, always imperfectly, in the mission of the triune God.”⁷⁷

Effective biblical worship both prepares congregants to be Jesus’ hand and feet in the world and comforts them in their worldly struggles. Going along with Piazza and Trimble’s analogy, worship is the heartbeat of the body of Christ and thus provides the pulse to the hands and feet. Without worship the hands and feet will lose circulation; they will lose their effectiveness. As Deanna Thompson explains in her theological commentary on *Deuteronomy*; “worship of God and justice for neighbor go hand in hand.”⁷⁸ She makes clear the relationship, in the book of Deuteronomy and throughout the Old Testament, between worship and Israel’s marginalized identity. As seen in Deuteronomy chapter 15, when the Israelites worship God, God is “turning to look” towards the marginalized within the midst of the Israelites while they “turn to look” towards God. Furthermore, in worship the Israelites are also recognizing God’s provision and the liberation God provided to the Israelites from injustice.⁷⁹ The Israelites are comforted in their “turning to God” that even though they are wandering in the wilderness and are a suffering community.

Church communities today must recognize the history of marginalization within their church, as well as marginalization done at the hands of the church. When the body of Christ is a suffering community, worship heals that suffering through the cross. As Luther and Bonhoeffer point out, when a Christian recognizes that Jesus is walking with them in their suffering as well as forgiving their sins, the Christian can then turn his or her attention towards the world, and bring that message to the world. This is the Christian’s call to fighting injustice.

⁷⁷ Migliore, 261-62.

⁷⁸ Thompson, Deanna A. *Deuteronomy*. 1st ed. Vol. 1. Louisville: John Knox, 2014. Print. 131.

⁷⁹ Thompson, 132, 134.

Today's American Mainline Church Being the Body of Christ

In bringing the message of the good news of Jesus Christ to the world, Christians across time have encountered major obstacles. Oftentimes these obstacles are manifested in the structural violence of the state or residing power of the time. This has been demonstrated in the previous discussion of Christendom. Therefore, Christians must counteract the structural violence in order to not only spread the good news but also work for justice as Jesus calls the body of Christ to do. This is where we find Bonhoeffer's idea of costly discipleship. Powerful examples of Christians responding contextually to structural violence can be found across history. In 1965, James Reeb, a white Unitarian minister from Boston was beaten to death in Selma, Alabama by white supremacists. This pastor had traveled to Selma to join in the Martin Luther King Jr.-led march from Selma to Montgomery after viewing the horrific events of "Bloody Sunday" on TV and hearing Dr. King's call for clergy from across the country to join the movement. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was also a pastor and headed the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 60s. He was murdered in 1968. Similarly, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran Pastor when he was killed by the Nazi regime during the Holocaust after he was discovered to be plotting to kill Adolf Hitler and other leaders. Reeb, King, and Bonhoeffer are examples of costly discipleship and understanding the Christian responsibility to fight injustice. These are extreme yet important models of following Jesus' call to justice and service for the church to follow.

The theology of responsibility is important to contemplate when discussing being the body of Christ in the world. How much does the church need to intervene in the world? Both of the Niebuhr brothers, H. Richard and Reinhold, wrote a lot about the idea of responsibility

before, during, and after World War II. This was especially true when the United States was considering invading Japan after their invasion of Manchuria in 1931. The Niebuhr brothers wrote letters to one another discussing the question of the United States' involvement in Manchuria. These letters were later published, along with other writings from H. Richard such as "The Christian Church in the World's Crisis" and from Reinhold such as *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. In his article *The Niebuhrian Legacy and the Idea of Responsibility*, Douglas F. Ottati compares and contrasts each of the Niebuhr brothers' theology of responsibility.⁸⁰

In his article, "The Grace of Doing Nothing," for *The Christian Century* H. Richard Niebuhr addresses the moral issue of Japan invading Manchuria and whether or not the United States should intervene in the conflict. Niebuhr argues that the United States cannot be constructive in intervening and that Americans, especially Christian Americans, can have much more productive inactivity.⁸¹ In this inactivity, he calls for Americans to reflect upon their own shortcomings, how America contributed to Japan feeling justified in this behavior, and repent for their sins. This allows for "divine process" to enter into the situation and allows God to birth things out of the destruction. Furthermore, Niebuhr asserts that "it is the inaction of those who do not judge their neighbors because they cannot fool themselves into a sense of superior righteousness."⁸² Rather than "fool themselves" into this mindset, Americans have to understand that (according to Niebuhr), "China is being crucified (though the term is very inaccurate)⁸³ by our sins and those of the whole world."⁸² For Niebuhr, there is no way to stop this crucifixion, as

⁸⁰ Ottati, D. F. "The Niebuhrian Legacy and the Idea of Responsibility." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22.4 (2009): 399-422. Print.

⁸¹ Niebuhr, H. Richard. "The Grace of Doing Nothing." *From Christ to the World: Introductory Readings in Christian Ethics*. Ed. Boulton, Wayne G, Thomas D. Kennedy, and Allen Verhey. Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Erdmans, 1994. 419-422. Print.

⁸² Niebuhr, H. Richard, 421

⁸³ This parenthetical qualification is original to the text.

it is the will of God. He trusts that God will make something out of the situation, and bring healing to the world. Allowing this divine process to occur by self-reflection and repentant inactivity makes way for God's divine process in Manchuria, the United States, Japan, and the whole world and will help to bring about the Kingdom of God. H. Richard Niebuhr's ideas on responsibility are both dated and somewhat problematic but they bring to light a common thought in Christians of the past as well as today. Many times Christians believe injustices are the result of collective sin and are God's punishment for these sins. This is why H. Richard Niebuhr feels that the United States should not intervene in Manchuria, as it would only perpetuate sin and continue to bring God's wrath.

But it is hard to believe that a country would be "crucified" because of sins when Christians understand Jesus as already having died on the cross for the world's sins. This is why H. Richard Niebuhr's arguments do not provide a good model of the body of Christ for today's church. Reinhold Niebuhr, H. Richard's brother, was given the opportunity to respond to his brother in his own article to the *Christian Century*, entitled "Must We Do Nothing?" Reinhold Niebuhr agrees with his brother on many points, but argues that following Jesus words; "let him who is without sin cast the first stone" literally would not allow for Christians to make a difference in the world or fight injustices. Reinhold Niebuhr does not feel that the moral aspiration for which his brother is calling can make the world a better place and is not all that a Christian should be striving for. "A truly religious man ought to distinguish himself from the moral man by recognizing the fact that he is not moral, that he remains a sinner to the end."⁸⁴ He continues to explain that because of our sinful nature, humans cannot take Jesus' words to mean

⁸⁴ Niebuhr, Reinhold. "Must We Do Nothing?" *From Christ to the World: Introductory Readings in Christian Ethics*. Ed. Bouton, Wayne G, Thomas D. Kennedy, and Allen Verhey. Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Erdmans, 1994. 422-425. Print. 423.

that we should never act. Rather, action should occur as a way to strive for justice and subsequently a more Jesus-like self and world.

Justice is probably the highest ideal toward which human groups can aspire. And justice, with its goal of adjustment of right to right, inevitable involves the assertion of right against right and interest against interest until some kind of harmony is achieved.⁸⁵

Reinhold Niebuhr believes that in order to achieve the ethical society that is motivated by pure, God-given love, that H. Richard Niebuhr wants the world to strive for, coercion must be used. Coercion is necessary because the sinful nature of man cannot be eradicated. But because Christians understand their own sinful nature and the forgiveness of this nature through Jesus Christ's death on the cross, they have the responsibility to then turn to the world and help the world understand this as well.

But as long as the world of man remains a place where nature and God, the real and the ideal, meet, human progress will depend on the judicious uses of the forces of nature in the service of the ideal.⁸⁶

This means that Christians have the responsibility not only to self-analyze and repent, but also to coerce others to do the same and to strive for justice. Keeping this in mind, churches must understand their role in social context. Injustices are acts of evil and churches have the responsibility to work against these things in Jesus' name. This is the alternative community of the body of Christ that prepares for the coming of the kingdom.

The theology of responsibility is important when examining the idea of church in context. Though the invasion of Manchuria occurred in the 1930s, injustices such as that event occur every day. There will always be an event into which the church can bring the gospel and Jesus' call for justice. As H. Richard Niebuhr explains, "Since the church envisions itself in the

⁸⁵ Niebuhr, Reinhold, 424.

⁸⁶ Niebuhr, Reinhold 425.

company of God...it must conceive its responsibility in terms of membership, in the divine and universal society.”⁸⁷ An example of this would be the Niebuhr brothers’ participation in the Federal Council of Churches in march of 1943 in which the churches of America came together to discuss Christian faith in light of war and the holocaust. At the same time, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was being arrested in Germany for an attempt on Adolf Hitler’s life. Both of these actions, coming together as churches to understand evil in the world and attempting to rid the world of evil, are Christian responses to particular contexts of injustice. Ottati explains that both Niebuhr brothers “agreed that the freedom of faith is the liberty to re-envision life and world in relation to God.”⁸⁸ To re-envision in this manner would be to respond to God’s love for humanity. But Reinhold Niebuhr went a step further than his brother in that he called for action, whereas H. Richard wanted this re-envisioning to occur in a self-reflective and moral sense. Reinhold Niebuhr explains:

The hope of attaining an ethical goal for society by purely ethical means, that is, without coercion, and without the assertion of the interests of the under-privileged against the interests of the privileged is an illusion which was spread chiefly among the comfortable classes of the last century.⁸⁹

This corresponds with Bonhoeffer’s thoughts that service to one’s neighbor, especially the less privileged neighbor, comes inherently in being a part of the Body of Christ. He understands being a part of the Body of Christ and the communion of saints as participating in the “reality of love” and that this love is “present only in Christ.”⁹⁰ In his book, *Communion of Saints*, Bonhoeffer explains that

⁸⁷ Ottati, 405.

⁸⁸ Ottati, 418.

⁸⁹ Niebuhr, Reinhold, 424.

⁹⁰ Roberts, J D. *Bonhoeffer and King: Speaking Truth to Power*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005. Print. 50.

Christ died for the Church so that its members might lead one life, with one another for one another. Our being for one another now has to be actualized through the act of love. Three great possibilities for acting positively for one another are disclosed in the communion of saints: renunciatory, active work for our neighbor, prayers of intercession, and lastly the mutual granting of forgiveness of sins in God's name.⁹¹

This means that love of God, revealed in the death of His only son, fosters love within the community of the church and motivates service to others as well. Because God went to the cross for humanity, He bestows *costly* love upon humanity. This love, for Bonhoeffer, should merit a response of *costly* discipleship from humans in return. Love and grace from God doesn't require anything of humans, but it does make for a way for Christians to live differently in an inherently evil world. This discipleship and living differently mean action! Christians are able to recognize the love that is bestowed upon them and are given the freedom in this love to live into that love of their neighbors. Neighbors are not just others within the Christian community, neighbors are from other faiths as well, including the Jews. When the world became aware of the horrors that the Nazi regime was enacting upon the Jews, Bonhoeffer knew that something needed to be done. He knew he had a responsibility to stop the genocide of the Jews, especially given that Hitler was using Luther's writings to justify his evil acts. Though the Holocaust is perhaps the most extreme example of injustice that a Christian would encounter, it is important to discuss Bonhoeffer's response to this injustice and what his response means for the church.

Bonhoeffer is an example of confronting ultimate evil. Church communities need to be equipped to do the same, even if it may be on a smaller scale. J. Deotis Roberts, author of *Bonhoeffer and King: Speaking Truth to Power*, expounds on Bonhoeffer's confrontation of evil:

For Bonhoeffer, moral evil in its personal and collective manifestations harks back to the human assumption of self-creation and rejection of God's role as the Author of nature,

⁹¹ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Communion of Saints: A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church*. New York: Harper & Row, 1963. Print. 130.

especially as the Creator of human life. Humanity refuses to remain creature and instead succumbs to the temptation to play God.⁹²

Thus, when Bonhoeffer returned to Germany to work to stop Hitler and the Holocaust, he was acting on the understanding that humans do not create the world, they are not their own saviors and do not make and unmake the world. Bonhoeffer saw events such as the Holocaust as examples of people in power “playing God.” There is even a German song that Hitler had children sing in their schools that translates to:

Adolf Hitler is our Saviour, our Hero
He is the noblest being in the whole wide world.
For Hitler we live,
For Hitler we die.
Our Hitler is our Lord
Who rules a brave new world.⁹³

Bonhoeffer understood this as evil and knew that Churches must stand against this. Furthermore, he understood the genocide of the Jews as fundamentally evil, especially in light of the fact that Jesus was a Jew.⁹⁴ Though as a Christian Bonhoeffer connected with and advocated for nonviolence, he felt he needed to meet the state with active resistance in order to make a difference. “Bonhoeffer viewed the Nazi reign of terror as mandating an exception to the normal response to an unjust situation.”⁹⁵ Bonhoeffer knew that as an enlightened Christian who fully understood the evil of Hitler he needed to act to stop the tyranny and genocide and that God was calling him to do so. Hitler was misusing the German church and Lutheran texts to justify his actions and Bonhoeffer could not let this happen to his church and couldn’t just stand by and let the innocent Jews be killed. “Bonhoeffer was convinced that, if need be, a Christian must offer

⁹² Roberts, 59.

⁹³ Roberts, 85.

⁹⁴ Roberts, 102.

⁹⁵ Roberts, 107.

his or her life to prevent this [totalitarianism that forces one to cast God aside and disregards the meaning of life and Christian love] from becoming the order of things to come.”⁹⁶ Out of love for his Jewish neighbor, in an act of costly discipleship in response to the costly gift of love and grace from God through the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, Bonhoeffer lost his life.

To Bonhoeffer, these acts with deadly consequences by religious leaders are a result of the seeking of “costly grace.” Costly grace, Bonhoeffer says, is the idea that because we are given grace freely and without consequence, it is our responsibility to respond to that free grace with action. This action involves following Jesus Christ, sometimes even to the point of death. Reeb, King, and Bonhoeffer are poignant yet extreme examples of discipleship following costly grace. Conversely, cheap grace is a more common phenomena in today’s mainline churches. Bonhoeffer explains that “as Christianity spread, and the Church became more secularized, this realization of the costliness of grace gradually faded.”⁹⁷ He describes churches of his time as giving out grace like a fountain. Not much has changed from Bonhoeffer's time to now. This is like Creasy Dean’s moralistic therapeutic deism. People are baptized without condition and Church has become an easy, feel-good affair. Churches are held in a cool, open warehouse. There is a Starbucks in the foyer. Congregants come into the service, listen to some hip Christ-centered music with lyrics displayed on a screen, and hear a sermon delivered from an iPad. They engage in limited conversation with their neighbors, leave and go on with their weeks. Sometimes cheap grace churches are also held in big, historic church buildings. The service involves a lot of pomp and circumstance and traditional liturgy. But the congregants of both types of churches don’t understand the message of the service and leave unaltered. Bluntly,

⁹⁶ Roberts, 109.

⁹⁷ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 507.

Bonhoeffer says “we gave away the word and sacraments wholesale, we baptized, confirmed, and absolved a whole nation unasked and without condition.”⁹⁸ This kind of church is *easy*. American Christians can rest assured in “ungodliness” when they sleep at night because they attended church on Sunday and received their assurance of free grace.

This practice of cheap grace is what has been detrimental for the church, and an understanding of how to move past this phenomenon is essential in learning how to be the body of Christ in today’s world. Bonhoeffer calls cheap grace Christians “spiritual corpses.”⁹⁹ Spiritual corpses do not uphold the church, but rather cause it to crumble. They are not following the path of “true discipleship.” To fix the church, Bonhoeffer explains that:

We must therefore attempt to recover a true understanding of the mutual relation between grace and discipleship...It is becoming clearer every day that the most urgent problem besetting our Church is this: How can we live the Christian life in the modern world?”¹⁰⁰

Bonhoeffer was exploring this question in 1937 and we are still searching for an answer today.

As our numbers decline and churches die we must learn to heed Bonhoeffer's words and understand that we are victims to cheap grace. Churches today are not often enough creating and supporting true disciples; they are not always giving their parishioners the proper tools to be true disciples. Our churches are staying at a surface level of Christianity and thus churning out spiritual corpses.

The churches we have encountered in America that do not follow the statistical decline are doing things differently than the majority of churches. These are not surface-level churches and they have one thing in common: they are actively working in their community. They fight for social justice among their neighbors and make a difference around them. They are churches

⁹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 622.

⁹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 634.

¹⁰⁰ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 645.

that exemplify the faithful discipleship that Bonhoeffer describes as the fulfillment of the call to be the body of Christ in the world.

...the disciples must leave everything else behind and submit to suffering and persecution. Yet even in the midst of their persecutions they receive back all they had lost in visible form--brethren, sisters, fields and houses in his fellowship, the Church consisting of Christ's followers manifest to the whole world as a visible community. Here were bodies which acted, worked and suffered in fellowship with Jesus."¹⁰¹

Churches that are fulfilling the model created by Christ and the apostles are a tight-knit, visible community that is active in the world. These churches work to counteract structural violence as Jesus did when he was on earth.

Examples of churches that work to follow this model can be found across the country. One of which is St. Olaf Lutheran Church in North Minneapolis. This church has a plethora of programs uplifting its community. These include an urban garden, a youth crime diversion group, and a clothing shelf. It is a thriving multicultural community that uplifts its members both in and out of worship. Hamline Church is a Methodist Church in St. Paul, Minnesota that thrives off its social justice committee, community garden and other volunteer programs. Pastor Mariah's church in El Cerrito, California was able to recreate itself by creating a ministry plan that centered around service to their community. These are not churches that allow for passive attendance in Sunday service. Rather these are congregations that take an active role in their faith, church, and community. The heart of their mission as churches is to give their everything to the community and thus they are not spiritual corpses but rather active, true disciples. Furthermore these churches and their congregations understand that this work in the community

¹⁰¹ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 248.

is not easy. They get backlash from some members of the community, suffer from fatigue, and aren't always as successful as they would like. But this is why it is called costly grace.

Discipleship means rising and following Jesus, not sitting and waiting for him. True disciples go out into their communities and bring the Kingdom with them. On Sundays they find comfort and reassurance in their mission but understand that their faith must be more than attending Sunday service. James Reeb, Martin Luther King Jr., and Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw atrocities being performed and understood that their call to discipleship was to stop the wrongdoings. These three men are extreme examples of true costly discipleship. They gave their own lives for their communities and for God. This doesn't mean that in order for Churches in America today to thrive people need to be losing their lives. Rather, Christians today need to be willing to put something on the line for their faith and for their community context. This often means the aforementioned backlash, fatigue, and failure. Bonhoeffer describes these acts and their cost as something "which radically affects his [a person's] own existence."¹⁰² Christianity is supposed to be life-altering! Disciples should have powerful experiences both in and out of the church as they work towards emulating Jesus. Trendy churches with Starbucks and screens and high churches with traditional liturgy both have the capability of creating these experiences for their congregants, but not if everything is kept at surface level and at the level of cheap grace.

Churches need to be the avenue for Christians to be true disciples practicing costly grace. Bonhoeffer gives steps to work towards this and the first is to attend church. This is already happening at the trendy church. In fact, oftentimes these trendy churches have the largest populations in America. Churches that employ very traditional liturgy and a lot of "pomp and

¹⁰² Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 772.

circumstance” (high churches) are also there, but as we have seen their attendance is declining across America. The next step is gradually more difficult; it is to follow Biblical law. We have seen Biblical law exerted in oppressive manners, but this is not to what Bonhoeffer is referring. Jesus calls for the love of one’s neighbor as the ultimate law. Bonhoeffer explains that “communion of love with my neighbour can subsist only in faith in God, God who in Christ fulfilled the law for me and loved his neighbour, and who draws me into the church, that is, into Christ's love and into fellowship with my neighbour.”¹⁰³ This is where our churches often stumble. The law and love are to coexist as one within the church.

If congregants are not taught about laws to follow and are not held accountable to them, cheap grace begins to slip in. Congregants are not made to understand that while their grace is not something they have to buy, they still must work towards being a good Christian and follow the word of God. Being a part of the Body of Christ also means obeying God and His command to love one’s neighbors. Different churches are going to have different neighbors depending on their context. This means that responding to context with costly grace is going to look different in a city church than it would in a suburban church. For example, if racial injustice is topic that both churches are addressing a city church may have more tangible, on the ground efforts to participate in working towards racial justice. A suburban church, on the other hand, may have to do racial justice work from a structural standpoint. If churches can teach their congregants this aspect and the ability to perceive the needs of their context, they will begin to move away from cheap grace and move towards costly grace. To work further towards practicing costly grace as a congregation, the next step is obedience to Jesus’ call in the world. Bonhoeffer understands that

¹⁰³ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 816.

this step will not be easy. But, “no one should be surprised by the difficulty of faith.”¹⁰⁴ Reeb, King and Bonhoeffer’s calls in the world were to combat terrible wrong-doings, and they were not easy tasks. Bonhoeffer acknowledges that this isn’t something that Christians can simply do by themselves. Having capable clergy is key in the development of disciples. These three men were examples of capable clergy as they led people in these movements. Together a congregation and its clergy can form a “visible body of Christ” practicing true discipleship, by serving in a costly manner and spreading Jesus’ love.

Bonhoeffer explains that the Church as the Body of Christ is to continue Jesus’ and the Apostles’ teaching and example. The Church is to continue the fellowship that they had with one another and with their community. Bonhoeffer explains that

if we grant the baptized brother the right to the gifts of salvation, but refuse him the gifts necessary to earthly life or knowingly leave him in material need and distress, we are holding up the gifts of salvation to ridicule and behaving as liars.¹⁰⁵

This is where a church’s social justice and/or work in the community is to come in. To offer the love of Christ by fulfilling a neighbor’s earthly need is to be the work of Christ in today’s world. To work towards justice and to raise up the oppressed is to “serve the fellowship of the Body of Christ.”¹⁰⁶ Reeb, King, and Bonhoeffer did this to the utmost degree. When Churches do this in their community, in their nation, or across the world they are truly being a church of true disciples and not spiritual corpses.

Similar to Bonhoeffer, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. also lost his life fighting for justice in the name of God. Throughout his life and theological development, King read texts from both of the Niebuhr brothers as well as Bonhoeffer. “King indicates that [Reinhold] Niebuhr sensitized

¹⁰⁴ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 807.

¹⁰⁵ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 324.

¹⁰⁶ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 327.

him to the depths of the human potential for evil.”¹⁰⁷ One of the realest and most felt evils in King’s life was racism; “a massive social evil.”¹⁰⁸ He knew that this was an evil that must be confronted, and that churches were not acting against the evil as they should be. In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King Jr. addressed concerns from local clergy in Alabama that he shouldn’t be engaging in his direct action activities. At the time, Birmingham was the most thoroughly segregated country in the city, and King was contacted by clergy in the area asking for his assistance.¹⁰⁹ He knew that he had a responsibility to respond to their call for help. Like Bonhoeffer he knew that he had a “moral responsibility to break unjust laws” in the area as he and the people of Birmingham moved into direct action that broke racist laws in the area.¹⁰⁹ The clergy felt that breaking these laws was ungodly but King asserted that these laws were not just and went against both moral law and the law of God. “A law is unjust if it is inflicted on a minority that, as a result of being denied the right to vote, had no part in enacting or devising the law.”¹¹⁰ This corresponds with Reinhold Niebuhr’s aforementioned idea that unjust laws like these are created by the comfortable and Christians have a responsibility to recognize those that are being marginalized by these laws and to challenge the laws.

King takes this idea even further as he introduces his idea of “the white moderate, who is more devoted to the ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.”¹¹¹ He describes this group as being an incredible stumbling block towards equality for the black community. This group prefers an

¹⁰⁷ Roberts, 57.

¹⁰⁸ Roberts, 56.

¹⁰⁹ King, Martin Luther, Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” *From Christ to the World: Introductory Readings in Christian Ethics*. Ed. Bouton, Wayne G, Thomas D. Kennedy, and Allen Verhey. Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Erdmans, 1994. 427-436. Print. 428.

¹¹⁰ King, 430.

¹¹¹ King, 431.

inactive peace that doesn't fight for progress because the fight would require breaking laws and the status quo and that wouldn't be peaceful. The white moderate feel no sense of urgency towards the black man's cause because they know it will "eventually" occur in a manner that they deem more appropriate. But King explains that "human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation."¹¹² This means that he cannot heed the advice of the white moderate to not break laws and use direct action, but rather must fight for justice.

On top of feeling blockaded by the white moderate, King felt incredibly disappointed and betrayed by the the white church. At the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, King felt certain that white churches would join the cause due to their religious morals and Jesus' call for justice in the world. But King exclaims that he was greatly disappointed, and surprised by the number of white churches that actually became opponents to the cause. Again, they became the white moderate stumbling block explaining that "those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern."¹¹³ King was distressed by this: "I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely other-worldly religion which makes a strange, unbiblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular."¹¹³ For King, the church is the body of Christ as well, but the church's "social neglect" and fear of disrupting the status quo has "blemished and scarred that body."¹¹³

But for King, acting against institutionalized injustice was so much more than disrupting the status quo. "King agreed fully with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Christian pastor hanged in 1945

¹¹² King, 432.

¹¹³ King, 434.

by the Nazis for resisting Hitler: ‘When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.’”¹¹⁴

Explains James H. Cone, in his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. King knew that in joining and heading the Civil Rights Movement he was fighting both for God and for the justice that God called him to. It was for the cross that King lived his life, just like the Niebuhr brothers and Bonhoeffer. But what is different in King’s struggle is his understanding of the relationship between the cross and the lynching tree. “While the cross symbolized God’s supreme love for human life, the lynching tree was the most terrifying symbol of hate in America.”¹¹⁵ Because humanity is saved through the cross, King understands that evils like white supremacy don’t get the final say in humanity. He also understood that the love that radiates from the cross is a love that “is named justice,” much like the Reinhold Niebuhr and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.¹¹⁶ For all three of these men, there were people suffering - bearing the cross - in the midst of their society. For Reinhold Niebuhr it was the people of Manchuria, for Bonhoeffer it was the Jews, and for King it was himself and his community; “enslaved, segregated, and black victims” in America.¹¹⁷ But unlike H. Richard Niebuhr, these other men did not understand this suffering as necessary or as something through which God was working. They were prepared to give their lives to end the injustices, rather than allow innocents to lose their lives at the hands of evil.

For King especially, the parallel between the cross and the lynching tree was a theology that dominated his life. “Like Reinhold Niebuhr, whom he studied in graduate school, King believed that the cross was the defining heart of the Christian faith. Unlike Niebuhr, his understanding of the cross was inflected by his awareness of the lynching tree, and this was a

¹¹⁴ Cone, James H., *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis, 2013. Print. 70.

¹¹⁵ Cone, 70.

¹¹⁶ Cone, 71.

¹¹⁷ Cone, 72.

significant difference.”¹¹⁵ As Jesus bore the cross for the sins of the world, the black man bore the sins of white supremacy on the lynching tree. “Through their own suffering, African Americans have often found themselves existentially at the foot of Jesus’ cross, experiencing his fate, believing that only Jesus understands their lot because they suffered as they have.”¹¹⁸ The gospel meets African Americans at their point of suffering. White Christians need to understand this, and Cone explains that “the church’s most vexing problem today is how to define itself by the gospel of Jesus’ cross” and how it relates to suffering today.¹¹⁹ Worship, faith, and community are of utmost importance for churches today but these things all need to occur with an understanding of the parallels between the suffering in today’s society and the suffering of our savior Jesus Christ. “The real scandal of the gospel is this: humanity’s salvation is revealed in the cross of the condemned criminal Jesus, and humanity’s salvation is available *only* through our solidarity with the crucified people in our midst.”¹¹⁸

Without concrete signs of divine presence in the lives of the poor, the gospel becomes simply an opiate; rather than liberating the powerless from humiliation and suffering, the gospel becomes a drug that helps them adjust to this world by looking for “pie in the sky.”¹²⁰

Without this solidarity and understanding, churches risk continuing what Creasy Dean described earlier as moralistic therapeutic deism.

Martin Luther King Jr. and Dietrich Bonhoeffer have given us concrete, albeit extreme, examples of how Christians can respond to injustices in the world in the name of God. Communities do not necessarily need to martyr themselves for social justices causes, but they do need to foster a sense of responsibility for their community and for their neighbor. The body of

¹¹⁸ Cone, 160.

¹¹⁹ Cone, 163.

¹²⁰ Cone, 155.

Christ should be a people for whom justice is the main orientation, but is something more than just a community organization. Daniel Migliore describes church as living and acting as “the body of Christ, the temple of the Spirit, and the servant people of God,” and stresses “the interconnectedness of life that is expressed in all the basic doctrines and symbols of classical Christian faith.”¹²¹ Cone expands on this when he calls American Christians to take the symbolism of the cross and the lynching tree seriously. “Before the spectacle of this cross we are called to more than contemplation and adoration. We are faced with a clear challenge: as Latin American liberation theologian Jon Sobrino puts it, ‘to take the crucified down from the cross.’”¹²² Therefore, the church as the Body of Christ is to follow the call to be Jesus in the world: offer worship and sacrament to feed the soul, but also notice, understand, and care for the crucified in their own community context. Oftentimes this caring will require fighting injustice. Cone explains: “I believe that the cross placed alongside the lynching tree can help us to see Jesus in American in a new light, and thereby empower people who claim to follow him to take a stand against white supremacy and every kind of injustice.”¹²³

Where does the church stand today in fighting injustice? Many would say that it isn’t visible in social movements today. As we have seen, the church doesn’t have the power that it used to, and so it has been less influential in fighting injustices. So how do churches fight if they cannot fight through power? Cone explains:

God’s reconciling love in the cross empowered human beings to love one another--bearing witness with ‘our whole being in the struggle against evil, whatever the cost.’ Thus blacks and whites together were free to create the American dream in society and the Beloved Community in our religious life.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Migliore, 250-251.

¹²² Cone, 161.

¹²³ Cone, 1.

¹²⁴ Cone, 70.

To become a Beloved Community and the body of Christ that the New Testament calls the church to be, the first step will be recognizing the church's shortcomings in recognizing injustices. This is especially when it comes to the lynching tree. When the church "takes the crucified down from the cross" in their own community and their context, whatever that may be, then they are truly being the church they are called to be.

In today's context, 2015, an emphasis on racial relations will certainly be important for churches. The Black Lives Matter movement is the first large-scale social movement focusing on rights for African Americans that hasn't been spearheaded by a religious leader. Churches need to find their place in movements like Black Lives Matter so that they can bring about justice in the name of Jesus. If churches do not do this, marginalization at the hands of the church will continue to occur. This is not cohesive with the picture of the body of Christ. Furthermore, multicultural congregations that meet the needs of the needy within community contexts are increasingly important. Churches such as St. Olaf Church in North Minneapolis try their very hardest to fill this role- a church in a multicultural community meeting the community where it is at. But this role is not easy to fill. Racial relations is a tough subject. We have seen in the above sections that the church in America does not have a great track record in caring for its black members.

Additionally, immigrant populations are also an increasingly marginalized community that needs to be supported by the church. But churches in impoverished communities do not have the monetary support as churches of the past once did. It is difficult to support those in need if a church cannot sustain itself. Because of this, sometimes churches who make an effort to fight against injustices in their community and meet the needs of the community don't thrive. But if

churches continue to make the effort to explore what it means to be the body of Christ in their context even in an impoverished situation, they will be fulfilling the biblical call to be church. There will never be a single picture of a thriving mainline Protestant church in America, However, churches can work through the messiness of their context and learn what it means to be the body of Christ in this context. It will be a continued learning process across America, but the learning process will indeed be worth it if it keeps the body of Christ thriving.

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